

Nature is our home

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It's cold tonight; no cloud to felt the sky nor hold the day's warmth down. The heavens pay for this betrayal with the stars: a billion silver shekels strewn across the night. I've walked onto the common — the grass frost-crisp beneath my feet — to be with sky.

The moon is big above my head, full fat for the second last time in 2021. We, in our triple-glazed-centrally-heated-WiFi world, have lost the meaning of the moon, but the rest of nature knows it still. The moon's high tides still pull great flocks of waders off the Wash, still flood our saltmarshes, dropping silt and driving hares and voles and shrews ashore. The moon still counsels winter geese, telling Iceland's pinkfeet that it's safe to stay inland all night to feed.

These are the geese I hear over the common tonight. Pink-footed geese which came from Iceland and from Greenland in September. Until the sugar beet harvest started, they fed in coastal grazing marshes, and gleaned in the last of summer's stubble. But they've come to Norfolk for our sugar; so as soon as harvest starts they change their ways. Pinkfeet are our wariest geese — far jumpier than brents or whitefronts — and when the moon and cloud allow they feed in secret in the night, roosting by day on Norfolk's wildest mudflats.

The sugar beet in the village has been harvested; and the moon has told the geese it's safe to feed under her watch. They're here, these thrilling beings of the arctic, filling the night with Nordic tales. My heart with joy.

Close by, another voice stabs the darkness: a hollow, rasping bark. I have disturbed a muntjac. Common everywhere in Norfolk now, when I was a boy to see Reeves's muntjac was a treat. Driving to Cambridge with my family, I would press myself to the window of the car and scan each ride in Thetford forest, hoping to see these strangers from China's southeastern mountains. It's well over a century since the first Reeves's muntjac were released in Bedfordshire, but even now their descendants carry this sharp alarm call in their genes. There are no leopards here, nor tigers — nor even native wolves or lynx, both hunted out in modern history — but these sharp-slotted, pig-backed deer still shout to the night on sensing danger. I am the danger they perceive tonight; though I am only here to feel the moon and stars and listen to the geese. I mean no harm to deer.

The night is good for us. It puts us, for a moment, in our place. Though our own species has existed for a little over 200,000 years, our genus — *Homo* — appears in the fossil record some two million years ago; since when we have been crafting tools and distancing ourselves from the natural world, from which we sprang. The great change came, of course, not with the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, nor with our colonisation of almost every environment on earth, but with the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent explosion of digital technology. Together these advances have meant that humans in the Developed World no longer harvest their daily sustenance — their clothing, shelter, water, medicines, food and sense of self — from the natural world around them.

It is this sense of self that matters. For being human means belonging in a landscape, in a nightscape and a starscape. For 200,000 years being human required an understanding of the plants and places and the perils all around. And with this reading of the landscape came the meaning of our lives. Without it — addicted to our screens — we are immeasurably poorer.

I'm on the common now because I need the wild in order to be me. I need the icy grass beneath my feet, the icy stars above. I need the cackle of the pinkfeet and the strange, exotic barking of the muntjac. I need the cold breeze on my face, the barn owl fizzing somewhere in the darkness, and the silent company of two million years of Hominins. *Australopithecus*, *Homo erectus*, Neanderthal: their genes flow through me even now. Their meaning too.

What would they think, I wonder, of our custody of their planet? What would they make of lives lived through the filter of our mobile phones, and apps and flatscreens? How would they judge the scars and stains of our dominion here?

I'm not pretending that our lives and our society are worse than those of relatives and ancestors. Not for one moment. The response of science and the medical professions across the world to the scourge of COVID has been heroic and remarkable. In a thousand ways our lives are better, healthier, more secure than those of even our most recent forebears.

But we have much to learn — re-learn — from them. Theirs was a tender tenure of the earth; treading lightly, taking little, staying local, walking barefoot. And yet their lives were rich in understanding and in meaning. We look for meaning in possessions, in ever wider travels, more exciting games and gadgets; yet we neglect the earth around us, and the stars and moon, all of which are redolent with meaning.

I'm on the common this November night to touch the thread which binds me to all living and unliving things — past, present, future — to vow before the moon that I'll remember them in every moment, with humility and love.

There's meaning in the long-tailed tits which purr and gossip through your garden. There's meaning in the dandelions pushing courageously through pavement cracks. And in the language written in the sky by starlings; the scent of fox; the flint and mortar used to build the village church. Nature's meaning is all about us — in us — if we would only look.

And looking — for the first time, truly looking — we see that we, and all our meaning, come from nature. That nature is our home.